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C O N F I D E N T I A L HELSINKI 000710

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: FINNISH BORDER GUARDS STRIKE CONTINUES WITH
LIKELIHOOD OF GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION

Classified By: Mikael Cleverley for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

1. (U) The Finnish border guard strike remains unresolved after the Finnish Border Guards Union rejected a proposed settlement by Frontier Guard management last week. The strike action, which began on May 31, is the culmination of six months of negotiations that have centered on the issue of labor contracts and wages. Currently the strike effects the patrolling of Finland's southeast border, though it is likely to soon impact customs administration at Finnish harbors as well as the Helsinki Vantaa Airport. Senior Frontier Guard officials are currently performing border guard responsibilities.

2. (U) The length of the strike (scheduled to continue until July 23 unless a settlement is reached) has been the cause of some attention in the press. An official dispute board is meeting today to assess the impact of the strike on Finland. The board can make (non-binding) recommendations to the Cabinet on ending or limiting the strike if it threatens national security.

3. (U) Meanwhile, Parliament has drafted a bill that will require large numbers--if not all--border guards to return to work in order to guarantee border security during the IAAF World Athletics Championships on August 6-14. The bill, which was voted down last week by the Social Democrats, is expected to be introduced again next week in an emergency session of Parliament.

4. (C) Post is optimistic that the issue will be resolved in advance of the championships. In private conversations, Parliament Speaker (and former Social Democrat Party Chair) Paavo Lipponen and Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen assured Ambassador Mack that the Government of Finland would intervene to ensure some kind of resolution. An assistant to Eero Heinaluoma, Chairman of the Social Democrat Party, made a similar statement to the Ambassador and suggested that an announcement might be made this week calling back Members of Parliament to an emergency session of Parliament (to take place on or around July 7th or 8th). All three indicated support for the bill.

5. (C) An Embassy contact within the Ministry of Interior expressed confidence that the legislature would pass a bill to address the security concerns of a prolonged strike. If nothing else, he projected, it would provide a temporary measure to cover the period before, during and after the championships. Although he expressed sympathy with the union members, he also observed that it was not a coincidence that they had chosen to strike in such close proximity to the championships.

MACK